Pastoral Planning for the Archdiocese of New Orleans

- A Pastoral Letter by Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes -

What a joy and privilege it is for me to serve the Catholic Church in the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Your warm welcome, cooperative spirit, vitality of faith and commitment to the mission of the Church have touched me deeply. Thank you for greeting me in this way.

In this presentation, I propose to make general comments about the archdiocese. They are intended to invite your suggestions and stimulate your reflection as we initiate this effort in strategic planning for the archdiocese. Please help in refining and enhancing these impressions as we move forward to develop concrete goals and objectives for the next three to five years.

I

General Reflections on the Experience of the First Year

Most of you are aware that I have visited every parish in the archdiocese, each of the Catholic high schools and a number of the pastoral and social efforts in place throughout the archdiocese. They have certainly provided an opportunity for me to come to know and to develop an initial bond with the good people of the archdiocese. Because the parish visits have primarily consisted simply of celebrating Mass and a reception, they have not provided the opportunity for an in-depth understanding of the parish life and ministry. But I am convinced from my experience that each parish has its own personality. That personality seems to be shaped by its history, the composition of parish membership and the quality of leadership offered by the pastor. I wish that my brother priests could appreciate as I do the significant ways in which they impact the life and vitality of our parishes.

Catholic Life 2000 was a significant archdiocesan-wide planning effort focused on our parishes. It has provided us with a blueprint as we continue to make decisions about the vitality of parishes and the best missioning of priests. An annual updating of this in each Deanery will allow us to continue to benefit by the wisdom and work reflected in the final report.

The New Orleans Archdiocese has a unique history. Unlike so many other dioceses throughout the United States, Catholics came and established the culture which emerged after interaction with the Native Americans. Catholics were involved in the explicit evangelization of the American Indian. The Catholic faith and way of life has always been evident in the public square. Many cultural practices and traditions can be traced to the early Catholic missionaries and settlers.

The vitality of Black Catholicism has struck me powerfully. Black Catholics have deep roots in faith. They have internalized their Catholic faith in a truly remarkable way. Their worship engages body, soul and spirit. They have also contributed many significant leaders to the wider community.

Undoubtedly, the greatest pastoral challenge I have personally encountered and we as a Church have had to face during this past year has been the revelations about clergy sexual misconduct with minors and the inadequacies of the handling of these incidents by some bishops or Church officials. It has been important for us not to be afraid to name this abuse of minors as sin and crime. We have had to call the perpetrators to account and repentance. We have also tried to offer help to victims and to families. We are trying to do all that we can to introduce policies and practices that truly protect our young people. As I have done publicly in the past, I again apologize in my own name and in the name of the Church for all the harm that

has been done. I hope that you find reassuring that the archdiocese has a new revised policy in place which takes seriously any allegations made about clergy sexual misconduct with minors. Our policy spells out the concrete ways in which we will respond to those who have been harmed and also respect the rights of the accused. Obviously, we are committed to fulfill completely all that civil law requires of us. In the pastoral letter which I wrote to the people of the archdiocese in May, I chose the title: *For Those Who Love God, All Things Turn to Good*. I believe that it is very important that we approach the darkness of scandal with Easter faith and hope. Where there is sin, grace abounds the more. It is ours now to cooperate with God's grace.

The present needs of the poor in the archdiocese have had a strong impact upon me. I rejoice in the way in which the Catholic Church has been reaching out to offer food to the hungry, clothing to those who have little to cover their bodies, shelter for the homeless, companionship and pastoral care for those who are sick or in prison. This outreach has been uninterrupted since the arrival and first efforts of the Ursuline Sisters in 1727.

II

Pastoral Challenges

Education

Few in our community will hesitate to identify the most pressing need in our community to be education. We need a strong commitment to Catholic school education.

The time has come for us to be innovative about offering quality education to our young people. This is the moment to press forward with parental choice in education. Catholic schools have consistently made a remarkable contribution in the education and formation, not only of young Catholics but also others who wish to benefit by the academic quality and religious formation offered in our schools. As we offer ourselves as partners in this effort, we also embrace the challenge of assuring the quality of our Catholic schools and the fulfillment of their mission.

In our own age there is a particular challenge to assure that those in high school are receiving a quality Catholic religious education. This is particularly true of those who are not enrolled in our Catholic schools. I have asked our Office of Religious Education and Office of Youth Ministry to work together in assuring that each parish offers an effective and holistic adolescent catechesis to our high school young people attending public schools.

Because a generation of young adults has not had the same opportunity that other adults have had in the past, we need to expand efforts similar to the Theology on Tap outreach to assist young adults to know, love and practice their faith and exercise the role as good parents of the faith for their children.

In this connection, we need to do everything we can to help prepare couples appropriately for marriage and to strengthen both marriage and family life.

Liturgy

Although practice varies from parish to parish, in general the archdiocese has followed effectively the direction that the Church has given to us since the Second Vatican Council in the reform of our liturgical rites. The challenge that still lies before us is to appreciate the interior mysteries that are celebrated in these rites. As members of the Latin Catholic Church, we use the term sacrament. Members of the Eastern Churches refer to these same realities as mysteries. We continue to experience a need to celebrate these sacramental mysteries in such a way that awe, reverence and interior participation are encouraged within the entire congregation. We also need to recognize that there are significant numbers of young adults who are no longer regular participants in the Sunday Eucharist. This poses a very significant pastoral challenge.

Similarly, the engagement of young adults in their sacramental preparation for marriage and the sacramental preparation of their children should call forth from within priests extraordinary effort and pastoral care.

Outreach to the Needy

The historical outreach to the needy in this archdiocese is truly extraordinary. The needs are great, the resources limited. It will be important for us to assess the needs as accurately as possible, to examine our own present efforts, and then to propose initiatives that respect our resources and capabilities but enable us to do the most good with what God has given to us. In this regard, I consider the recent combination of Catholic Charities with the Social Apostolate to provide a firm foundation for these efforts.

Many have not yet become acquainted with the social teaching of the Church. It will be important to help the faithful to understand it and to live it not only as it touches individuals in need, but also impacts social structures.

The Encouragement of Priests

From the beginning of my episcopal ministry in this archdiocese I have tried to express in word and deed that pastoral care and fraternal outreach to my brother priests is my very first priority. Our priests have suffered greatly during the last year and a half. Sadness and shame have touched us to the core. Yet you know as well as I the truly remarkable priestly life and ministry offered by countless numbers of priests, past and present, in service to this archdiocese. The most important antidote to scandal is holiness of life. How important it is going to be for us to continue to offer quality continuing educational and formational programs to assist our priests in rising to the level of virtue God calls us to live.

It is going to be important to give focused and persistent attention to the encouragement and cultivation of vocations to the priesthood. The present climate makes it even more important to extend personal invitations to those who seem like potentially good candidates and to encourage those who are exploring the call.

It will also be incumbent upon us to find the best way to offer assistance to priests so that they may still exercise the overall responsibility of pastoring but focus in an ever more fruitful way on those areas of priestly ministry that are unique to them alone. This will mean the special preparation of deacons, religious and lay people who may be able to relieve pastors of some administrative details in our parishes.

The restoration of the permanent diaconate has been a great grace in this archdiocese. We will need to expand this area of ministerial service so that this gift can continue to bear fruit.

Religious now serve in a wide variety of ministries and services. One of our challenges will be to assist them in attracting new vocations in service to the Church.

Finances

The wonderful spiritual, educational, pastoral and social efforts of the archdiocese require significant funding. A number of the institutions that have been serving for years are now in need of significant capital funding for projects. A weak economy and a diminished return on investments have also impacted the financing of our pastoral efforts. We have been operating on a deficit budget for a few years.

In September 2001 Archbishop Schulte, with my concurrence, appointed a committee to study stewardship and development in the archdiocese. They were to review the present sources of revenue and the ways in which we secure funds, explore new ways to access funds in a more pastoral and efficient manner, and propose concrete methods to improve stewardship and development at the archdiocesan and parochial levels. The task force has recommended that we approach this in a truly spiritual way with prayer as the foundation of our efforts. They have urged the formation of a committee to review the formula for "parish

share" assessments, the archdiocesan second collections, and the possibility of an annual appeal. They rightly recognize the importance of organizing and developing a multi-level stewardship education program. Obviously, these multiple efforts will demand appropriate personnel.

III

Evangelization

It seems to me that underlying each of these pastoral challenges is the issue of evangelization. We need a renewed sense of what it truly means to be Catholic. We need together to live our lives in such a way that they would not make sense except for our faith.

The spirit of evangelization will enliven our Catholic schools. For Catholic schools, school spirit is not secular. It is a lively embrace of our Catholic identity and mission. This will also enable us to have an impact on the wider community as we bring that spirit to those who come to us. Once religious education is experienced by our adolescents and young adults as a significant moment in their evangelization, they too will be encouraged to evangelize others. Some will be attracted to a religious vocation.

The evangelizing spirit will enliven our liturgies. Engaging homilies will touch the heart. The prayerful, dignified celebration of the sacraments will touch people interiorly.

When evangelization motivates our outreach to the needy, we not only respond to bodily needs, but we are able to touch the soul as well. Many will be drawn to the faith by the experience of social outreach truly enlivened by the kind of evangelizing love that marked the life of Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

There is nothing that will renew the priesthood more than enkindling the fire of an evangelizing mind and heart by stirring the grace of ordination. This will inspire the faithful. It will inspire priests themselves. It will also attract those whom God may be calling.

I am convinced that we will not have to be concerned about finances if we are able to break open the message of stewardship in a way that is truly in keeping with the Gospel message. Those who take their faith seriously are the most generous supporters of the Church.

May I then identify the enkindling of the evangelizing spirit as an overarching concern for the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

IV

Concluding Invitation

I present these reflections, not as a definitive report, but as a stimulus for reflection in the archdiocese. Now is the time to establish priorities for the next five years. I need to hear from you so that together we can develop goals and strategies for realizing them.